

Samuel Beckett *Krapp's Last Tape*, The Other Place 26 June 1997

Krapp (Edward Petherbridge) carries his tape recorder and boxes of tape to the brightly lit desk of his darkened "den", holding the load tightly to his bosom in a gesture repeated at the end of the play. These minor emendations of Beckett's stage directions are warranted because the machine is the surrogate for the lover he rejected in favour of "the fire in me now", a giant literary ego. Petherbridge's convincing Irish accent, and the downplaying of Krapp's vaudeville clownishness (no purple nose), hint at a "Portrait of the Artist as an Old Man".

The large ledger which serves as an index to the reels gives tantalizing titles to the recordings: "the black ball", "memorable equinox". When he plays the tape a much younger Krapp describes as unforgettable these moments which, alas, the "wearish old man" has forgotten. One sequence sticks in his mind and Krapp repeats its index numbers: box 3 spool 5. Krapp impatiently winds passed his youthful literary revelations ("The vision at last") to find again the recollection of peacefully gliding on a punt with Bianca who agreed "it was hopeless". The younger Krapp declares himself "Well out of that, Jesus yes!" but for his septuagenarian self this is a highpoint of all the recordings; recollections of his mother's death and his expanding literary consciousness are secondary.

Krapp steps away from desk into the darkness of his den to consume bananas (despite the younger man's advice to "Cut 'em out!" for the sake of the bowel condition) and to drink excessively. Younger Krapps "consumed" their hours "on licensed premises" but now increasingly housebound he hides bad habits in dark corners away from the machine. Beckett's precise stage directions assume proscenium arch conditions and for the RSC's studio venue minor liberties have been taken. In an effort to avoid the unavoidable, Krapp tries to dispose of discarded banana skins "into the pit" as Beckett wanted, but unwittingly throws them behind him. Beckett dressed the stage with tape recorder and microphone in place, but here Krapp significantly retreats to the darkness to fetch the single ear of his only companion. Petherbridge's engagement with the machine brings to the surface the dynamics of Krapp's last relationship which Beckett buried too far below the surface of the text.

Two pieces of invented business concerning the difficulty of mating electrical plugs with sockets so appropriately symbolize Krapp's diminished connectivity that they deserve to become part of the accepted text. Making the latest recording Krapp gazes first at the machine's spools (a word he relishes as the younger Krapp relished Bianca's eyes) and addresses himself to them before realizing his mistake and moving to the microphone.

Writing in 1958, when domestic tape recorders were the latest interactive technology, Beckett was careful enough to set his play "in the future" so that Krapp may own a magnetic record of his life. The materiality of the written and spoken word is one of Beckett's themes and disjunctions between the handwritten index and the sonorous recording are properly highlighted in this production. Reading an index entry Petherbridge pauses deliciously between the words at the foot on one page, "Farewell to...", and its completion at the top of the next: "...love". The recordings are not

artificially punctuated but are subject to other constraints and much of the characteristic Beckettian clowning concerns the difficulty of finding the desired segment. The moment rediscovered, Petherbridge's final image of himself enfolding the machine is more affecting than Beckett's "Krapp motionless staring before him" and adds the tiniest moment of warmth to this cold work.